

Too Prepped to Pivot? A critical exploration of pre-professional identity development in graduates.

Ciaran Burke¹, Tracy Scurry²

¹University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol, United Kingdom.

²Newcastle University, Newcastle, United Kingdom

Research Domains

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Abstract

In recent years there has been increased emphasis on the value of developing pre-professional identity during undergraduate studies. Pre-professional identity is argued to be a valuable resource for graduates – creating a sense of confidence/belonging in the labour market and providing initial knowledge and dispositions to navigate the market (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021). In the context of a graduate labour market with high levels of graduate under-employment and graduates spending more time outside of their initial desired professions/industries and the subsequent need for resilience (Burke and Scurry, 2019) this paper critically examines the benefits of developing a strong pre-professional identity this early in a graduate’s career. We problematize the concept of pre-professional identity through a multi-level exploration of the following areas:

- The acceptance of hegemonic professional identities
- The assumed homogenous nature of the labour market and their sub-fields
- The impact of pre-professional identity on graduate resilience and adaptability

Full paper

In recent years there has been increased emphasis on the value of developing pre-professional identity as a means to enhance graduate employability (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021). This approach reflects processual perspectives of university to work transitions which argues that graduates are not made upon graduation but rather they emerge through their time at university and through their early engagement with the labour market. Under this lens, graduates need to claim that they have an employable identity which is then confirmed or rejected by key stakeholders including recruiters, interview panels and line managers (Holmes, 2013). The development of pre-professional identity is argued to be a valuable resource in 'graduate identity' claims with significant focus in the literature on how and what Higher Education Institutions teach can support students to develop pre-professional identity and how access to resources can affect this development.

Whilst work on pre-professional identity has highlighted that different groups have varied access to resources that enable them to develop and self-author their pre-professional identities – there is limited interrogation of what they are being asked to develop or fit to (Kaiser, 2002) and the consequences of this for their ability to be resilient and adaptable. Furthermore, there is a need to interrogate if a strong professional identity is something to aspire to as it may prevent individuals' from adapting and shifting to the fluid and uncertain contexts that characterise modern working lives (Trede et al., 2012).

In this conceptual paper we critically examine the benefits of developing a strong pre-professional identity this early in graduates' career. We take as our starting point that the current graduate labour market is characterised by an imbalance of supply and demand, high levels of graduate under-employment with graduates spending more time outside of their initial desired professions/industries and the subsequent need for resilience (Burke and Scurry, 2019).

We problematise the concept of pre-professional identity through a multi-level exploration of the following areas:

- The acceptance of hegemonic professional identities
- The assumed homogenous nature of the labour market and its subfields
- The impact of pre-professional identity on graduate resilience and adaptability

First, we interrogate the status-quo of professional identity and the reasons behind this. We build on previous work by Friedman and Laurison (2019) on the importance of social background for entry to elite occupations, to question the extent to which the exposure undergraduate students have to professional gatekeepers through pre-professional identity development reproduces a symbolically violent (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) process of misrecognition of legitimate professional identity and ones to aspire toward.

Second, this paper critically examines the impact of presenting an artificially homogenous graduate labour market, or sectors, which does not reflect the wide range of professional settings and occupations that graduates will encounter. As such, through the strength and durability of pre-professional identity being developed within a narrow and limited set of professional settings, students may prepare for a market which is not reflected in reality. This can include developing specific resources recognised by limited occupations/sectors and failing to identify and pursue alternative market opportunities.

Finally, this paper will consider the friction between pre-professional identity and graduate resilience when navigating the labour market. This paper will apply Burke and Scurry's (2019) model of graduate

resilience comprising of: recovery, goal re-orientation, adaptability and self-efficacy. We question whether an established and durable pre-professional identity allows graduates to signal and perform these elements of resilience. In particular, this paper focuses on how a pre-professional identity might limit graduates in re-orientating their goals and adapting to an ever-changing labour market. To further conceptualise the implications of a durable and rigid pre-professional identity, we will adopt a Bourdieusian theoretical lens, framing professional identity as professional habitus. This approach will allow us to consider how both its durability and limited reflexive deliberation allows/prevents a graduate to pivot when the situation arises.

This paper will provide a set of conceptual critiques of pre-professional identity development as an approach to support graduate employability and improve graduate outcomes. We will conclude with an agenda for future research by questioning the assumed benefits of developing pre-professional identities for graduate employability and raise questions about the 'pre-professional identities' that graduates are expected to develop and signal to gatekeepers.

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